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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine the attitudes of students and their parents about classroom assessment in one elementary school classroom in Scotland in the context of the Scottish "Assessment 5-14" document. Informal observation and student responses to mid-session and end-of-session questionnaires showed that students valued assessment. What mattered most to the students was to have assessment as part of the process of learning and the processes of thinking about learning and talking about learning. Students and those of their parents who answered a parent questionnaire particularly valued knowing in advance what would be assessed and receiving a mix of formal and informal assessment with understandable grades, and students also valued self- and peer-assessment. Parents wanted useful information about their child's progress and not just summative assessment. (SLD)

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Assessment 5–14: What do pupils and parents think?

Patricia Atkinson, Primary School Headteacher, Stirling

What do children actually think of the assessment that is carried out in school? We know what teachers do, and what national guidelines suggest, but is assessment actually effective for children in improving their learning, and their thinking about their learning? This action research enquiry into pupils' voices was undertaken by Patricia Atkinson, a teacher convinced of the value of a repertoire of assessment strategies, and concerned about the ineffectiveness of 'marking', compared with assessment for effective learning. The study won First Prize in the SCRE Practitioner Awards for 2000.

WHY STUDY ASSESSMENT?

For several years I was involved in staff development in a Scottish Region, firstly as Development Officer for the *5 14 Programme*, and then as Primary Adviser. During these years I worked with class teachers, school managers, school clusters, support and advisory services, colleges and the local university. My job was to support staff in improving learning and teaching at all levels, and included the management of staff development courses.

On returning to school I wished to evaluate how pupils and, to a lesser extent, parents viewed assessment as an aid to effective learning. I was keen to see whether the advice given in the *Scottish National Guidelines for Assessment 5 14* (SOED, 1991) was adequate. The guidelines stress the need for assessment to be informative, practical and positive, but my feelings were that *recording* of assessment was taking over the curriculum at the expense of teaching and learning.

I decided, within the classroom setting, to concentrate on what I saw as the most useful forms of assessment for improving learning, namely *formative* (to inform the learning process), and *diagnostic* (to enable appropriate action to be taken). However I did not ignore a third form, *summative* (summarising a child's progress).

WHAT KIND OF INVESTIGATION?

I had been involved in action research for fifteen years, carrying out small-scale studies in language, thinking, and equal opportunities, all based around two central themes – personal development for children and staff, and empowered participation by children, sometimes now called 'children's voices'. I believe teachers should be building their *own* knowledge-base from practice, and making it public. My strongly held belief is that teaching should be a research-based career, contributing to the overall knowledge of effective education.

Action research is eminently suitable for professionals studying their *own* situation – the teacher can be a participant, but also a researcher. It is appropriate for studying a dynamic situation in depth.

In general, action research involves at least one cycle of Planning, Action, Observation and Reflection as part of the process of improvement. When children's views are also taken into account, action research becomes democratic and empowering.

In this study I used an approach suggested by Whitehead (1985), based on a number of practical questions:

(i) What is my concern?

(ii) Why am I concerned?

(iii) What do I think I could do about it?

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(iv) What kind of evidence will I collect to help me make judgements?

(v) How will I collect the evidence?

(vi) How will I check that my judgement is reasonably fair and accurate?

ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES USED IN CLASS

The study was planned to look in depth at whatever assessment I happened to have undertaken in the previous weeks.

A whole repertoire of assessment strategies was used, such as any teacher might fit into his/her programme. These varied from very informal and positive formative styles (eg a brief word of encouragement) to diagnostic (through observation and discussion) and summative (written grades or final comments on actual performance). Assessments were practical, oral and written, and included marks, single words, comments and suggestions for improvement. I included considerably more self- and peer-assessment than is implied in the *Assessment 5 14* document.

All routine work in folders or jotters was marked in pencil, to allow for change. Only blue or black pen was ever used, for summative assessment, no red. Children normally marked their own work in Maths, made judgements about quality and were not required to do corrections if they realised what they had done wrong. Children often swapped work for comment by peers. I checked jotters regularly and held discussions about learning (curricular) from self- and peer-assessment, and learning (personal and social) from being given this responsibility.

I allocated time in class to what I call 'meta-assessment', or talking about the interlinked processes of learning and assessment, plus reflection. In time this talking about targets, criteria for assessment and processes of assessment was taken for granted by children, and reflection became a feature of their effective learning.

Shortly after the research was carried out, HMI praised the effect this had in school. Pupils were able to tell the Inspector very clearly, exactly what they were learning and why, and how they were being assessed, or assessing themselves, and why.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research was designed around four different enquiries in order to provide for triangulation, or cross-checking of evidence:

Informal Observation (first term)	Brief written notes
Pupils' Questionnaire (mid-session)	Assessment in general
Pupil's Questionnaire (June)	Assessment of specific work
Parent's Questionnaire (end of session)	Assessment strategies in general

Informal observation and questionnaires are both methods which classroom teachers find manageable. Questionnaires in particular are useful in that they can be analysed in different ways, and at home after work! They have their limitations, but the main purpose of this research was to find what children thought of their assessment activities as an aid to learning.

WHAT CHILDREN'S VOICES REVEALED

Informal observation

During the first term, children found a number of aspects of assessment helpful for their learning, all of which I refer to later in this article.

Mid-session questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed to focus in on most of these. It contained 18 questions on *general* aspects of assessment, all based on the children's positive comments in October, namely:

- who actually assessed the work
- whether grades, comments or suggestions for improvement were helpful
- self- and peer-assessment
- keeping personal records of assessment
- thinking of others' feelings when assessing their work.

All pupils valued almost all forms of assessment in the repertoire. They valued the *range* of assessment strategies, the *range* of purposes, and the *discussion* about assessment. They believed these aspects of assessment helped them to learn more effectively.

Pupils also responded positively to the involvement of different people (themselves, adults and children) in their assessment. They wanted to do well and hoped for general advice that would further help them. They were keen to know what could be improved and to be given suggestions for ways to do so.

But of particular interest was the confirmation that they liked to help other people with their schoolwork, either while actually working and learning, or in terms of assessment.

Interestingly, the children appreciated the value of assessment, and all our talk about it, as a part of the *process* of learning. In particular, they appreciated those assessment techniques which were based on self- and peer-assessment. They also welcomed other strategies which focused on *reflection*. Embedding talk about assessment into the normal day not only motivated children, but also helped increase self-esteem in some.

Teachers now accept it matters how children regard themselves. If children see themselves as competent *learners*, then they want to learn and are willing to find ways to do so. When children see learning as a desirable process they learn more effectively and efficiently.

The teacher is a key person in the development of reflective ability. She/he may help children to look into themselves, to question themselves, to develop an ability to be

fair to themselves, to judge their performance adequately. And children value respect from their teachers. They thrive on opportunities for autonomy, responsibility and power. They can be independent learners when they know not only the purpose of each activity but also the assessment criteria, in advance. When they are clear about these, children achieve more, through paying attention to the key aspects required. The affective (feelings) and cognitive (intellectual thinking) spheres must be developed together.

End-of-session questionnaire

The second pupil questionnaire was designed as a further form of triangulation, revisiting aspects of assessment already evaluated by children, but based on 20 specific pieces of work that had been assessed during the year. These ranged from one page to a whole book, and included: a class test on punctuation; assessment with grades, comments, suggestions and criticisms; and self-, peer- and parent-assessment.

Once again it was clear that all children valued most forms of assessment.

Pupils felt that responsibility for self-assessment and evaluation was useful even though it might be hard. They particularly liked the feeling of doing well when they had found something difficult. They enjoyed the satisfaction in being required to think, not only about curriculum knowledge and skills, but also about their approaches to work, their ways of working and their reflection on how they were progressing as they journeyed through their last year at primary school.

Analysis of the original, informal, observations and both questionnaires demonstrated that children especially valued:

- knowing that assessment was on-going, including routine oral work and activities
- knowing in advance what would be assessed (out of all learning taking place)
- a mix of informal and formal assessment
- variety
- reference to official documents (SEED guidelines) as targets for learning
- grades (✕, ✓, G, G+, VG, Excellent) for completed pieces of work (summative assessment)
- asking parents for comment
- self-assessment
- peer-assessment.

WHAT PARENTS' VIEWS REVEALED

Parents matter. Their view helps to balance those of staff and children.

The parents' questionnaire was about assessment in general. I asked parents to comment on aspects of assessment, in discussion with their child. Their views on self- and peer-assessment were of particular interest.

Parents were asked about self-assessment, oral and written, marks and judgement, record-keeping, tags with grades and comments, positive and negative ('Next steps'), written remarks and peer assessment.

Interestingly, though parents' views generally confirmed the value of different forms of assessment, some parents had views completely at odds with the children. Some parents were unsure of self-assessment, and some were very uncomfortable with the idea of written peer assessment. This was not what the children thought.

Two parents were not happy with children marking their own work. I have great sympathy with the parents who gave these views, because it is conventional for teachers to mark children's work themselves. I can understand their concerns. However, the present research confirms the value of other forms of assessment in the child's wider, personal and social development.

My long term experience is that when pupils mark or, even better, evaluate, work for themselves it benefits both teacher and child. It gives the teacher time for more detailed analysis of children's progress or problems, or for generally more useful preparation for future lessons in other subjects. Also, marking at the time, or immediately after finishing, is known to be beneficial to learning, but many teachers find this too difficult to do in class, so mark after work.

The children themselves found that it was useful for them in a whole variety of ways, including the speed at which their work was self-marked, and corrected, if required.

Self-assessment and self-evaluation helped children to become better learners, being more aware of themselves and their ways of working, all of which are known to produce better thinkers. In addition, self-assessment enhanced motivation for many, and thereby, self-esteem.

Research now shows that working out all 'corrections' in Maths can be counterproductive (Haigh, 1997). This confirms my own experience that a little give-and-take is extremely valuable in motivating children. When children are given responsibility for their own learning, correction or evaluation, they feel respected.

Just as a few parents were uncomfortable with self-assessment, a few also expressed opinions against peer-assessment, such as pupils evaluating each other's work. I was surprised about the strength of the reaction to this form of assessment from a minority of parents, as the children had so strongly valued peer-assessment. Not one child that year ever commented negatively about another child's work.

Children *openly* spoke of taking account of others' feelings when assessing their work. I already had plenty of evidence from previous years that children would normally do so, but I thought they might be shy about admitting it in writing. An approach that takes account of others' feelings is awarded Level E in Language (Talking), the level expected for most children, not in primary school, but when they reach second year in secondary school.

Nevertheless, the fact that this was the least popular aspect of assessment for *parents* requires further reflection. While many of the fears about children being negative to others, and about children being too immature to cope

with the responsibility of this, are unfounded, aspects to do with sensitivity and tact need further consideration. We could think that children should perhaps only choose their own partners for written peer-assessment, but we might also wonder whether children would recommend improvements to a friend. On the other hand, it may be that primary children work and learn better with a close friend.

The questionnaire demonstrated that the parents wished useful information about their child's progress (especially regarding their achievements or what they might need help with), and not simply summative assessment.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Taking all four parts of the research together, the aspects of assessment that were particularly valued by parents and children for improving the children's learning were:

- knowing in advance what would be *assessed* (out of all learning taking place)
- a mix of informal and formal assessment
- variety
- grades (X, ✓, G, G+, VG, Excellent) for completed pieces of work
- asking parents for comment; and
- self- and peer-assessment.

What matters most to children is to have assessment as a part of the process of learning, and of the process of thinking about learning and talking about learning. As a result of my study, I recommend that teachers:

- develop a repertoire of procedures and techniques
- match learning to assessment, and let children know in advance what will be assessed
- ask children their views
- cut down on routine marking to gain time for taking a closer look at specifics
- keep parents informed regularly, simply sending home children's assessed work for comments, if convenient
- do not confuse assessment for learning with record keeping; and
- develop self- and peer-assessment, as well as reflection on achievement, to aid children's critical thinking and self-esteem.

A WIDER RESEARCH CONTEXT

It is perhaps useful to compare my hands-on experience of children's views of the usefulness of assessment to those of Black and William in their 1998 review of the literature. I agree with their view that formative assessment is what matters:

(i) if the principal purpose of assessment is to support learning rather than accountability; and

(ii) if the purpose is to enable pupils to understand the ways in which they can contribute and become responsible for aspects of their own progress.

My research also confirms that children agree with the findings of the *Review of Assessment 5 14* (Hayward *et al*, 2000) that assessment should:

- support learning, provide feedback and identify next steps in learning to result in significant learning gains
- involve pupils meaningfully in their own learning
- help pupils understand the ways in which they can contribute and become responsible for aspects of their own progress
- help the learner to perceive a gap between present and desired knowledge
- help identify the action necessary to close the gap
- take account of the impact of attitude and motivation on students' learning
- reflect the central importance of self-assessment
- stimulate the correction of errors through a reflective approach to them; and
- improve deep rather than surface learning (such as strategies to pass tests).

It is to be hoped that the *Assessment is for Learning Programme*, which began in 2002, run by Learning and Teaching Scotland, can begin to redress the balance between formative and summative assessment, and help teachers improve their children's learning and lives, rather than perpetuate the present dominance of the summative form.

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